

BRAVE NEW WORLD WIDE WEB REVISITED

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Deadheads preparing to enjoy Barlow's lyrics in his Rocky Mountain region. Photo by Mark L. Knowles. GNU Free Documentation License, Version 1.2.

February 8 marks the silver anniversary of an iconic early manifesto defending the Internet as a space where personal liberties and social cooperation might flourish free of political control ... just in time. John Perry Barlow emailed “[A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace](#)” from the World Economic Forum the day Bill Clinton signed into law restraints on free expression via the Telecommunications Act of 1996.

Barlow couldn’t have foreseen that on February 2, 2021, *The New York Times* would [print](#) a call for incoming President Joe Biden to appoint a “reality czar” to verify online information. He did predict that national administrative substitutes for “parental responsibilities” would fail to contain “the virus of liberty” in “a world that will soon be blanketed in bit-bearing media.”

Barlow's Declaration promptly became ubiquitous in the cyberspace it extolled, its text reposted on tens of thousands of web pages (no mean feat when websites numbered in the hundreds of thousands). Detractors penned multiple Declarations of the Dependence of Cyberspace on governmental oversight, misinterpreting Barlow's ideal of a World Wide Web freed from rulers as a Wild West Web un-moored by rules.

Barlow himself [noted](#) on his Declaration's twentieth anniversary that it had become largely remembered as "an example of the sort of wooly-headed hippie thinking we could entertain in more innocent times." He admitted that he had overly high hopes for the amount of "horizontally networked consensus" that would result, and that he had underestimated the new medium's potential for abuse.

Yet if Barlow under-emphasized the basis of his confidence in voluntary agreement to those who lacked his experience with the "unwritten social contracts" undergirding everyday life in his home state of Wyoming, he himself failed to fully appreciate its power. He [told](#) Reason magazine in 2004 that the very nation-states he had famously declared "weary giants of flesh and steel" eight years before were now "the only force I know that is fairly reliable" at "countervailing against monopoly."

To the contrary, political gigantism is the source of economic monopoly. United States Steel Corporation chairman Elbert Henry Gary feared the "[bitter warfare](#)" of unregulated competition, as have industrialists closer on the cutting edge to U.S. Robotics than U.S. Steel. Microsoft [called for](#) the United States to enact "a broad, nationwide privacy law" in 2005, just as users were abandoning Microsoft Internet Explorer for more secure competing web browsers like Firefox and Opera. Similar regulatory capture tipped the balance away from such alternatives and toward the consolidation of the Internet into a handful of centralized platforms.

Freedom of exit to innovative upstarts can still restore the potential of the early Internet to secure freedom in virtual reality, and in the real world "of flesh and steel" as well.

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- "[Brave New World Wide Web Revisited](#)" by Joel Schlosberg, OpEdNews, 02/06/21
- "[Brave new world wide web revisited](#)" by Joel Schlosberg, Intrepid Report, 02/08/21
- "[Brave New World Wide Web revisited](#)" by Joel Schlosberg, Elko, Nevada *Daily Free Press*, 02/08/21
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- "[Brave new World Wide Web revisited](#)" by Joel Schlosberg, Brattleboro, Vermont *Reformer*, 02/09/21

- “Brave New World Wide Web Revisited” by Joel Schlosberg, Ventura County, California *Citizens Journal*, 02/11/21
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